

Lesson 1 | September 3, 2023

God's Covenant with Abraham

Study Text: Genesis 12:1–20; 15:1–21; 17:1–14; 21:1–8; 22:1–19

Central Truth: God still calls people to enter into covenant with Him.

Key Verse: Genesis 15:6

[Abram] believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness (KJV).

Abram believed the LORD, and the LORD counted him as righteous because of his faith (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will examine how the covenant given to Abraham fits into God's overall plan to bless the nations by bringing salvation through His Son, Jesus Christ.
- Students will explore the lasting significance of God's repeated declaration of His promise to Abraham as well as circumcision as the sign of the covenant.
- Students will examine their own faith, noting how that faith is demonstrated through acts of obedience.

Introducing the Study

Say: People can mean a lot of different things when they say, "I am blessed." These three words might be spoken by someone who just purchased a new car or someone who learned their cancer is in remission. It is important to consider perspective when we look at what it means to be blessed.

Opening Activity—Blessed by God

Ask: *What are some ways God has blessed you?* Examples can range from God providing funds to pay bills during a time of trouble to knowing He has given us everlasting life. Each example is important and worthy of rejoicing.

Say: God has blessed us in many ways. Genesis places these blessings in perspective by reminding us of the perfect relationship people originally shared with God and how it was lost. As we begin this unit, we are reminded that the message of Scripture largely follows the unfolding of God's greatest blessing: His plan to redeem humanity. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Genesis 12 is one of the most critical passages of Scripture when it comes to understanding God's desire for His creation. His overarching plan is rooted in the concept of relationship. It can be said that the rest of Scripture after Genesis 3 tells us God's plan for restoring humanity to the relationship we enjoyed with Him before Genesis 3. When we talk about blessing and covenant, we must look at the terms in

light of God's plan of redemption—a plan sealed by His covenant, which begins to take shape in Genesis 12.

Part 1—Called of God; Covenant Instituted

Abraham's Calling

Genesis 12:1–5

Say: When we think of Abraham's calling, we rightly focus on the way he put his future fully in God's hands, accepting the challenge to leave everything behind in blind obedience. Yet as we study Abraham's calling, we find that his faith encompassed much more than a change of location. (Share your highlights from the following text.) V
(Play the video highlighting the ancient site of Beersheva—available at RadiantLifeCurriculum.com/Adult.)

Resource Packet Item 1: The Land that I Will Show You

Distribute the map, and note the location of various key points in Abraham's journeys as you move through the unit.

We are first introduced to Abraham in Genesis 11:27–32. (He was originally called Abram before God changed his name in 17:5.) The son of a man named Terah, Abraham lived in Ur, a prosperous city in southern Mesopotamia located about 120 miles west of modern-day Basra, Iraq. Terah sought to move his family to Canaan, but instead settled in Haran, a city in what is now southeast Turkey that was about a month's journey from Ur. Haran was a popular stopping point for travelers and caravans. Verse 30 notes a critical detail: Abraham and Sarah were childless.

Resource Packet Item 2: God's Covenant with Abraham

Distribute and discuss the information sheet. Note that this information can inform our understanding not only of this lesson, but also the way these passages relate to our relationship with God today.

The word *covenant* is familiar in Christianity. At its root, it refers to a treaty, agreement, or promise. In Bible times, a covenant normally took place between a ruler and those subordinate to him. In this case, God is the benefactor, or caretaker, of this covenant. Its existence and administration depend solely on Him. Abraham—and all humanity—bore the responsibility to follow His commands as the people of His covenant. Abraham would complete the migration to Canaan, but he would do so alone, venturing into an unknown land with only his wife and nephew, separated from the support and care of his extended family.

Genesis 12:1–5 introduces us to the key word *blessing*, variations of which occur five times in verses 2–3. This reminds us of God's blessing on humanity in Genesis 1:22,28. Here we see that the restoration of God's blessings on the first human beings would be restored through this one man, Abraham. Conversely, one could also experience God's curse through this one man, just as the world was originally cursed through one man.

These verses describe a pivotal moment for humanity, drawing our minds back to the accounts of creation and the Fall.

Abraham's calling included a sevenfold promise (12:2–3, NLT):

1. "I will make you into a great nation."
2. "I will bless you."
3. "I will . . . make you famous" (or "make thy name great," KJV).
4. "You will be a blessing to others."
5. "I will bless those who bless you."
6. "I will . . . curse those who treat you with contempt" (or "curseth thee," KJV).
7. "All the families on earth will be blessed through you."

Note that "make you famous" means more than superficial fame. In the Ancient Near East, a person's name was more than an identification label. It spoke to one's character—how he or she was esteemed and regarded in the world. Abraham's calling included both his identity in the world and his impact on the world. The same would be true of his children and future generations. They would exemplify greatness and serve as a vessel for the delivery of divine blessing.

It's important to view this promise of greatness through the eyes of a God-follower. Abraham's promise included both his innumerable descendants—which would involve a miracle—and his significance as one whose blessing would reach to all the people groups of the earth. Such blessing would occur as people acknowledged the one true God. Until the time of Christ, Abraham's descendants represented the salvation that would come through Christ. Since Christ's ascension, the Church—God's people everywhere—points the world back toward Christ, introducing them to the blessings of God they can enjoy today and forever as His followers.

Sadly, those who responded to Abraham with scorn and ridicule would receive God's curse. To understand this, we must remember that Abraham's name focused on his role and character. To curse him ultimately meant cursing the Giver of the blessing being offered. Rejecting God's plan of redemption is rejecting God himself.

Today, we continue to function as Abraham's children (see Galatians 3:6–9), bearing the blessing so Genesis 12:1–3 is fulfilled and all the earth might be blessed through Abraham. The journey that began in verses 4–5 continues on a spiritual plane as God's people declare salvation and new life through Christ.

Discuss

- ? What do you think the word *covenant* means for Christians today?
- ? What blessings of God do you enjoy every day?

The Calling Is Confirmed by Covenant

Genesis 15:1–21

Say: Genesis 15 is comprised of a wonderful, twofold divine encounter in which God reaffirms His presence and blessings to Abraham. This encounter reminds us God will always fulfill His promises. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Genesis 15 details God's powerful covenant promise to Abraham. Verses 1–7 are key, because Abraham's divine encounter includes two "I am" statements: "I am thy shield" (verse 1, KJV; literally, "I am the One who protects you") and "I am the LORD" (verse 7; literally, "I am the one, true, sovereign God"). The explanations of the covenant promise are built on the foundation of God's nature and character.

In verse 1, God reminded Abraham of the promise He had originally given him about ten years earlier. Abraham was not questioning God's plan or character in verse 2; instead, he simply wondered how it could be possible for an elderly couple to become parents of a great nation. That is why he considered adopting a servant like Eliezer of Damascus to fill the position of heir. But God said this measure would not be necessary, because the number of Abraham's natural descendants would dwarf the number of stars overhead (verse 5).

Abraham "believed the LORD" (verse 6, NLT). Scripture does not say he simply believed the promises but that Abraham focused on the Promise Giver, holding a steadfast trust in Him. Abraham's faith was personal confidence in God himself. Abraham wrapped his identity in God's promise.

The sealing, or confirmation, of the covenant is described in verses 17–18. It follows a treaty format common to the Ancient Near East—but with some startling differences. In a normal treaty, both parties walked between the sacrificed animals, demonstrating mutual commitment to the promise being made. But in Abraham's covenant, only "a smoking firepot and a flaming torch" (verse 17, NLT) signifying God's presence passed through the animals, indicating that the promise rested on God alone. Ancient Near East treaties often included blessings and curses based on whether the covenant was kept or broken. While God's blessings are clear in these verses, there is no curse attached to failing to keep this covenant. God would uphold His portion, and no human being could thwart its completion or stand in the way of its fulfillment.

This promise would be fulfilled long after Abraham's death (verses 12–16, 18–21). All kinds of hardship would befall his lineage, including slavery in Egypt. Yet deliverance would come and Abraham's descendants would fill the land as God had promised. Through them, the entire earth would be blessed.

Discuss

? What is the significance of God counting Abraham's faith to him for righteousness (Genesis 15:6)? How does this help you better understand the role of faith in Old Testament times?

? God told Abraham that almost all of the promise would be fulfilled after Abraham died. How can that reality inform our understanding of faith?

Part 2—Covenant Sign Commanded

The Covenant Is Confirmed

Genesis 17:1–8

Say: Human nature makes it easy for people—even Christians—to focus on the negative. Thankfully, God is faithful to remind us of His many promises as we walk through life. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

In Genesis 17:1–8, God once again reminds Abraham of His promise in the form of a name change. In chapter 16, Abraham had fathered a son with Sarah’s servant Hagar. He and Sarah had struggled to reconcile God’s promise with the reality of not having a son as they grew older. But God did not desert Abraham or rescind His promise, despite Abraham’s struggles. God’s covenant (as established in chapter 15) was lasting and enduring. Abraham’s imperfection would not and could not change that.

God again described Abraham’s future: He and Sarah would have countless descendants (17:1–2). As Abraham fell on the ground in worship, God announced this was “my covenant” (reaffirming its everlasting surety) and outlined the obligations of each party in the covenant: God himself (verses 4–8), Abraham (verses 9–14), and Sarah (verses 15–16). A sign accompanied each section: Abraham’s name change (verse 5), circumcision (verse 10), and Sarah’s name change (verse 15). Note that this is what some scholars refer to as an “unequal partnership.” God’s people would always depend on God as the promises came to pass.

Abraham’s former name, *Abram*, means “exalted father,” possibly a reference to Terah or to God. But the name *Abraham* means “father of a multitude.” This change, like Sarah’s, would be a constant reminder that they and their descendants carried the promises of God.

Discuss

? Why is it vital to remember that we must depend on God for His promises to come to pass? What happens if we try to fulfill His promises on our own?

? What are some signs today that remind you that God is with you and that He keeps His promises? How do these signs impact your life?

The Sign of the Covenant Is Identified

Genesis 17:9–14

Say: While God initiates and fulfills the covenant promises, His people confirm His covenant through obedient response. In Genesis 17:9–14, God commanded Abraham to initiate a sign that would confirm the covenant. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

Genesis 17:1–8 describes the covenant as everlasting or enduring forever. We know from 12:1–3 that the covenant included God’s blessing as a promise to all the peoples

of the world. Abraham's seed would be the means through which this everlasting covenant would be brought forth and proclaimed.

In Genesis 17:9–14, God commanded a physical sign to accompany His covenant with the people: circumcision. This rite was significant for a number of reasons. The permanent physical alteration would signify the everlasting nature of the covenant. It also served as a reminder of the unique calling from and relationship with God, as well as the people's obligation to walk before Him in holiness, which would later be established in the Law (see Leviticus 11:44; 19:2) and carry over into the New Testament as a command to Christ's followers (see 1 Peter 1:16). While we often think of holiness as purity and cleansing from sin, we cannot overlook its root meaning, which involves being set apart from the world by God for His purposes. For New Testament believers, the "sign of circumcision" would endure, but it would be a circumcision of the heart (see Romans 2:25–29) by which our desires, aspirations, and values are purified and set apart for God.

Discuss

? What does it mean to say that your heart is "circumcised"?

? How does your heart reflect the transformation God has brought about in your life?

Part 3—Abraham Tested Regarding the Covenant God's Promise Comes Alive in Isaac

Genesis 21:1–8

Say: As we noted earlier, God's covenant promise would be fulfilled almost entirely after Abraham's lifetime. Yet he was able to see that promise begin to come about in Genesis 21. Through Abraham's experience, we are reminded that God's promises do not grow weaker or fade away as time passes. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

God's promise of a child came to pass with the birth of Isaac when Abraham was one hundred years old and Sarah was ninety. This wasn't the final fulfillment of God's covenant promise, but the opening scene of God's plan to bless humanity.

Genesis 21:1–2 emphasizes the faithfulness of God three times: "The LORD kept his word," did "exactly what he had promised," and it "happened at just the time God had said it would" (NLT). The account of Isaac's birth is rather short, but the focus is entirely on God as promise-keeper.

Isaac's name in Hebrew is a play on the word meaning "laugh" or "to laugh." It recalls Sarah's incredulous laughter at the notion that she would have a baby at ninety (see 18:12–15). But her doubtful laughter was transformed into joyous laughter. God honored His promise, and Abraham and Sarah's faith—weak as it was—became sight.

Discuss

? Why is it important to focus first and foremost on God and who He is rather than the blessings He brings into our lives?

? Name three ways God has blessed you, and describe how those blessings impact how you view and understand Him.

Abraham Is Victorious through Testing

Genesis 22:1–19

Say: Genesis 22 records one of the most familiar stories in the Old Testament. Despite its familiarity, we must not fail to grasp its powerful message of faith. (Share your highlights from the following text.)

At first glance, Genesis 22:1–14 is among the most peculiar accounts in Scripture. Abraham is told to sacrifice his miracle-child on a burning altar. As the story unfolds, we are not told God’s intentions. Instead, we only hear Abraham’s reflections on what is happening—and apparently, his faith is not shaken.

When the sacrifice of Isaac is halted, God says: “Because you have obeyed . . . I will certainly bless you” (verses 16–17, NLT). God’s promised blessing was never in doubt. In His omniscience, God knew Abraham’s faith. True faith is more than mental assent; it is a matter of obedience. Verse 12 makes it clear that Abraham feared God. The fear of God might be described as recognizing that He holds life and death in His hands and living accordingly. Abraham shows us that obedience is inseparable from true faith.

Discuss

? Why are faith and obedience inseparable (see also James 2:14–26)?

? What part does our obedience play in the unfolding of God’s promises?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Faith and works are inseparable. The life of faith is a relationship, an ongoing interaction between God and His children. Take time this week to examine your life and ensure your faith and works are aligned.

Resource Packet Item 3: Promises from God

Complete the worksheet together, noting how God’s promises change the way we live and the way we view our circumstances and God himself.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

■ Invite others to share how God’s promises have helped when their faith was challenged.

■ Tell someone what God has done in your life and remind them we all can share each other’s joys and burdens as we walk through this life of faith.

- Examine the ways you put your faith in action, asking God to help you minister to others as an act of worship to God and compassion for them.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

The Noahic Covenant.
Genesis 9:8–17

Tuesday:

The Mosaic Covenant.
Exodus 19:1–8

Wednesday:

The Davidic Covenant.
2 Samuel 7:8–16

Thursday:

The New Covenant Promised.
Jeremiah 31:31–34

Friday:

The New Covenant Instituted.
Luke 22:14–20

Saturday:

The Greatness of the New Covenant.
Hebrews 8:1–13